

Setting the Stage for the First Free Reading Zone

The Master Plan

As already explained, the story of FREZ began in the United States, but that's not where it culminated. It culminated in Croatia, of all places, a small country in the southeast of Europe where I was born and where I lived until my teenage years, when I moved to the United States and eventually resettled in New York City. Croatia's capital of Zagreb, however, had always remained a home away from home. At the time that I was helping Total Boox build its digital portfolio, I found myself spending more time on the other side of the pond than I did in New York (for personal as well as professional reasons).

As I often stated in my FREZ-related speeches and writings, there comes a point in every person's career where we crave to turn our jobs into missions, and it isn't enough to earn a paycheck anymore. We take a leap of faith and jump. For me, the "jump" meant that I would relocate to Zagreb, abandon the comfort of a steady retainer (for consulting) or a steady paycheck (for being a full-time employee), and embark on what would become the project of my life: turning an entire country into an open virtual library. It also meant that I would be in charge of every aspect of the project, since no one was waiting there to take on the challenge with me or for me, and it meant that I would be responsible for the cost associated with getting the pilot up and running.

The master plan was to turn Croatia into the world's first Free Reading Zone through the use of the Total Boox app, which would be "masked" as a new app called Croatia Reads. People would be able to use this app inside the borders of Croatia regardless of their location—for example, in the privacy of their home, at the beach, on the city's main square, in

trains and buses, across secluded rural regions—and read to their heart's desire any of the books in the collection housed on Total Boox's website and accessed through the app.

Given Croatia's small size (covering just under 22,000 square miles) and its modest population (4.3 million), the entire country could be managed as a FREZ in its entirety, even on a small budget. The big launch would take place in December 2016, just before the holidays, and the sponsor of the first month of free reading would be *No Shelf Required (NSR)*, the portal (formerly a blog run by an academic librarian) to which I had been contributing as a volunteer for years and which I had the privilege of inheriting from the librarian who used to run it. By 2016, *NSR* had evolved into a multifaceted portal advocating innovation with e-books beyond the one copy–one user model, among its other missions (under my leadership), and it was the perfect platform to expose the project and its development. By mid-2017, and as a result of the Croatia Reads project, *NSR* also became an organization on a mission to help libraries and other entities implement and launch FREZ around the world.

NSR would pay Total Boox for the development of the Croatia Reads reading app (which would be a replica of the original Total Boox app, with some necessary adjustments) and for the reading to occur during the first month of FREZ in Croatia. The two would agree on a flat fee as they would agree with any other sponsor of FREZ, taking into consideration the country's population, likely reading outcomes, and the cost of technological upkeep. The goal (and hope) was that *NSR* would serve as an example to other potential sponsors in the country, who would quickly see the benefits (in practice, not just in theory) and agree to carry on the sponsorship further into 2017.

After signing a contract with Total Boox on behalf of NSR in the summer of 2016, I had four months to pull it all together in a country I hadn't lived in since childhood and whose laws and business ways I had no experience with. Why Croatia, then? There are many reasons why Croatia was the perfect place for such an experiment, none of which have to do with my personal connection to the land and its people, at least not the reasons that made the most sense for the project and its underlying mission:

- It is a country small and compact enough to be turned into a FREZ in its entirety, and as such, it could, hopefully, become the project the Croatian government would take interest in long term because it involved and benefited all its citizens, even its tourists and visitors.
- It is a country visited by 15–17 million people annually (more than three times its population), so there would be interest in the multilingual offering in the collection (most books were in English, but many were in other languages as well, including French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and even Croatian), and as a result, the benefits would be significant for the department of tourism (not only for the departments of education and culture).
- It is a country with many remote areas where access to books and knowledge via libraries is limited at best (especially on the islands in the Adriatic), and through this open library, books would reach people who normally didn't have easy access to books and libraries under the best of circumstances. Aside from several urban areas of the main cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Dubrovnik, and Zadar), most of the country could be described as rural.
- It is a country where buying printed books is a privilege that many cannot afford; the average printed book in Croatia costs about fifteen to twenty dollars (similar to what it is in the United States), while the average monthly income of most Croats is a fraction of what it is in the United States (circa \$1000 per month).
- It is a country where libraries function on astonishingly limited budgets and have not taken any steps toward offering e-books in their communities (or digitizing their collections), so the project would directly support libraries and other institutions of knowledge and learning because it would allow them to get involved without asking them to contribute financially (this was part of the plan early on).
- It is a country where e-books have never taken off and e-book reading has not been popular. Not only are e-books not offered through libraries (not even the biggest public library system in the

capital of Zagreb), they have not become popular among consumers or even avid readers (most have never read an e-book on a mobile device). Since one of the project's goals was to show that if the right conditions were created for consumption of e-books, regardless of how much experience users had with e-books, people would consume them, Croatia Reads, if successful, would help dispel the myth that people didn't read e-books because they didn't like the *experience* of it but instead they didn't read e-books because they didn't think they should have to pay for digital format.

- It is a country dependent on the tourism and hospitality industry to drive economic growth and the well-being of its citizens, many of whom are either employed in the tourism sector or depend on it heavily to run businesses geared toward tourists. FREZ was an opportunity to give Croatia a one-of-a-kind venture that would help it stand out globally not only for its physical beauty that has been attracting tourists from around the world for decades but also for technological innovation. Through FREZ, Croatia would become the first country to offer its tourists, anywhere inside its borders, the gift of free reading in their native language (or many others). Tourists that landed in Croatia during the time FREZ was in effect would be immediately able to download the Croatia Reads app and open a Lonely Planet travel guide to Croatia, among thousands of other books in hundreds of categories, and would be able to continue reading and enjoying the open library during their entire stay.

At the time I relocated to Zagreb, the Total Boox catalog had grown significantly, so all the work put into signing publishers prior to ending my consulting work for the company had paid off. The collection was strong, diverse, and multilingual, approaching 100,000 titles and growing weekly. When promoting it to sponsors (and other publishers), I often emphasized the following:

- over 500 new titles added weekly
- emphasis on quality books
- all subjects and categories included
- about 300 publishers represented
- 100 percent of content vetted
- books available in several languages

The reading app, too, had undergone some notable improvements over the course of several years and was generally receiving good feedback from users in the United States. The reading app that people in Croatia would use would have the same interior features and functionalities. The only difference between the

Croatia Reads app and the original Total Boox app would be the icon, the name, and some small technical adjustments throughout to ensure readers weren't charged while the reading was being monitored. Some highlights:

- compatible with Androids and iOS devices
- not compatible with the Windows Phone and dedicated e-readers
- required all e-books to be in (reflowable) EPUB format
- allowed users to sign in manually (using e-mail) or via Facebook
- sent users to the Total Boox website to get books
- required a single click on the Download button to place the book onto a top shelf inside the app
- allowed users to create personal shelves inside the app and make them private or public
- fully adjustable font type, font size, and background color
- allowed users to highlight passages and share them on social media
- allowed books to be searched by keyword or browsed by category or subcategory
- allowed searches to be filtered by popularity, author, title, and language
- allowed users to jump from one part of a book to another through table of contents or by using the percentage line at the bottom of the screen

As far as publishers were concerned, since they already had contracts with Total Boox—which ensured that they got paid any time anyone read any part of any of their titles in the collection, regardless of where the readers may be and who they may be (individual consumers, library patrons, or people inside a FREZ)—Total Boox did not need to ask for their permission to make the titles available in Free Reading Zones or sign new agreements for this or any other potential FREZ we'd work on together. As far as the contracts were concerned, there was no difference between reading occurring on an individual consumer's device, a public library patron's device, or a device of a reader inside a FREZ.

As diverse as the content in the collection was, it did not include Croatian books, so it was necessary to bring Croatian publishers on board to make the collection more relevant and attractive to the residents since many would be interested in reading books in their native language. That said, it's important to add here that Croatian natives are generally multilingual and are used to reading books and being educated in languages other than Croatian, particularly in English. As we later learned, the vast majority would be interested in reading books in English, not their native language, since those were the books not easily found in the local bookstores.

Even though the vast majority of Croatian publishers lag behind when it comes to digitization and many do not have their books available in EPUB format yet, we were able to secure contracts with two major Croatian publishers of high-quality fiction and nonfiction right away, Fraktura and Ljevak, which agreed to sign with Total Boox so that their titles would be exposed in the same collection. The only way into a FREZ in Croatia, in fact, was through Total Boox, so if publishers did not work with Total Boox, they were not able to expose their titles in this FREZ.

Other publishers in the collection, as stated previously, included a wide variety of well-known brands from around the world representing countless subjects and categories, trade and academic, including Workman, Elsevier, Lonely Planet, Berlitz, De Gruyter, Oxford University Press, O'Reilly Media, Sourcebooks, Open Road Media, Berrett-Koehler, Other Press, the Independent Publishers Group, Hay House Publishing, the Red Wheel Weiser Group, Rourke Education, Lerner Publishing, ECW Press, F&W Media, Algonquin, Marshall Cavendish, Chicago Review Press, New World Library, Storey Publishing, Timber Press, Artisan, Triumph Books, the Pelican Group, and many others.

Marketing and Public Relations

Since the technology and the content were under control from the beginning, most of my energy in the months leading up to the eventual launch in December was spent focusing on PR and marketing, building a small local team who'd help on various fronts, and presenting FREZ and its goals to potential sponsors in advance. These included both private corporations in the country and government officials from one of the three ministries: culture, education, and tourism. These also included several Croatian libraries, with which we met on more than one occasion and informed well in advance of what was to happen in December.

While most librarians showed enthusiasm, they were not able to support the project beyond helping to advertise it to their patrons when it launched. I had already been aware of their devastatingly low budgets and was not expecting monetary support from them but felt it was important to notify them in advance out of respect. I agreed to participate in several library conferences and events for the purposes of informing the country's library leaders of what to expect, inviting them to help us promote FREZ to their patrons, and partner with us in spreading digital literacy.

A small team who'd support my efforts along the way formed quickly and, as fate would have it, did not involve librarians. I needed help in four key areas: Croatian content and publishers, IT and technical

support, PR, and a place somewhere in the country's capital to serve as the testing ground for a few weeks leading up to the launch. While I was in charge of holding presentations for the potential sponsors, remaining in daily communication with Total Boox and its employees in Israel and the United States, and acting as the public face of the project when communicating with the media, I relied on a small group of people to cover the areas I had less expertise with. Their enthusiasm for the project, generosity, open-mindedness, and willingness to go the extra mile for no personal gain ensured that I remained focused through some inevitable challenges along the way.

Natalija Mladenović was instrumental in getting the Croatian publishers on board as well as writing and editing the texts that needed to be presented in the native tongue and released to the media (including press releases, social media campaigns, PowerPoint presentations, etc.); Trpimir Šugar was instrumental in ensuring that technical support would be provided to people if they encountered any difficulty while reading (the app would direct users having technical difficulties to contact technical support via an e-mail or by calling Trpimir's cell phone directly); Mate Rončević, a PR consultant, handled the publicity for the project, which involved daily communication with top newspapers and TV channels; and Ana Petričić Gojanović was co-owner of a well-regarded establishment in downtown Zagreb, Café Velvet, which would serve as the place for the first FREZ pilot, both to help the café's own brand and to help FREZ garner publicity in advance and test the user experience. Ana and Velvet co-owner Saša Šekoranja were also instrumental in securing support from local celebrities, who agreed to be photographed reading on mobile devices.

The plan was for Velvet to become the first Free Reading Zone in Croatia two months before the entire country would become a Free Reading Zone. Ana and Saša agreed to come on board as private sponsors (i.e., cover the cost of reading during those two months, which we calculated in advance based on the café's size and average number of daily guests). This meant that Velvet was not only to become the first café in the world (that we were aware of) to be turned into an open virtual library, but it would also become the very first (small) Free Reading Zone, where people would be able to test the app, while remaining unaware that the country would soon be turned into an open virtual library in its entirety.

While residents and tourists were reading thousands of e-books for free at Zagreb's trendy downtown café, the team was busy setting the stage for the launch of the country-wide initiative, engaging potential sponsors, and taking notes directly from Velvet users.

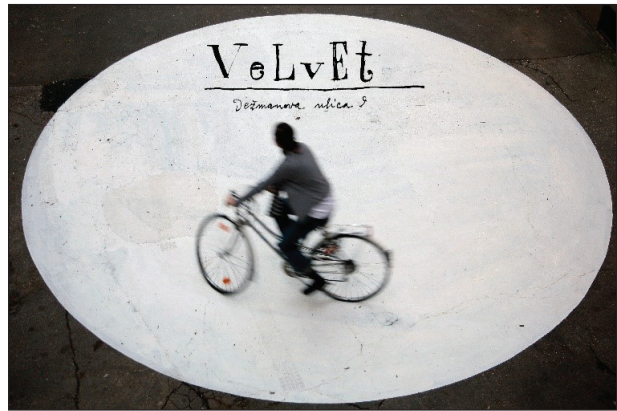


Figure 3.1
Image by Saša Šekoranja

The Velvet Experience

On September 22, news broke out across the Internet that a well-known café in Croatia's capital had become a Free Reading Zone—an open virtual library that could be accessed by its guests and enjoyed free of charge. All they needed was to log into a free reading app via an access code found on the receipt. Within seconds, they were given immediate, uninterrupted access to books in several languages, and once they registered via the access code, they were able to read at the café or continue reading at home through the end of the day (codes change daily).

Many asked how this was possible as soon as we made the announcement. How can a café with fewer than fifty tables on its premises provide free access to a virtual library bigger and richer than the city's main library system can afford its patrons? How can this little business give Zagreb's residents and tourists access to more knowledge than a government-funded institution? We tried to answer these and similar questions in the first official press release, but we also remained available to journalists and the media for further inquiries. We also wanted most interviews and meetings with potential sponsors (for the country-wide project) to take place at Velvet because there we were able to show them firsthand how the app worked and let them test it as actual users.

This was the official press release announcing the launch of Velvet FREZ shared with the media:

Croatia Is Home to the First Café in the World Turned into a Free Reading Zone

No Shelf Required is honored to announce that Café Velvet in Zagreb (Croatia's capital) is the first café in the world turned into a Free Reading Zone. Guests of the café (located in downtown Zagreb, on the iconic Dezmanova Street) can log into a virtual library (via any iOS and Android smartphone and tablet) and access thousands upon thousands of books in several languages,

including English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Croatian, among others. The locals may enjoy literature in their native language while countless tourists who visit the country's capital each day can read in other languages. All they need is to log in using an Access Code provided by the café.

The technology is powered by Total Boox, [an] ebook service known to U.S. publishers and librarians for its pay-as-you-read ebook model which makes ebooks instantly available, with no limitations, holds, or expirations, while paying publishers for reading. Readers may browse Total Boox' collection of nearly 100,000 titles, which includes books in all categories—from literary and genre fiction to poetry and philosophy; from cookbooks, arts, and photography to sports, entertainment, and travel; from children's books and YA literature to professional and scientific literature. Publishers represented include an array of world-class brands from around the globe.

The Free Reading Zones project and initiative was launched in 2016—under the leadership of Mirela Roncevic, Editor of *No Shelf Required*, and in cooperation with Total Boox—with the goal to spread reading to various public and private spaces beyond libraries and endow them with culture. These “zones” may be sponsored by private and public institutions, corporations or government entities and include, among others, parks, hospitals, trains, airports, schools, universities, cafés, etc. When Free Reading Zones are sponsored by libraries, users inside the zone access the collection via their active library card; when sponsored by private entities (as in the case of Velvet Café), readers simply log in using an access code and the cost of reading is transferred from readers to the café.

“It's an honor to lead such an important initiative, and to take it outside the United States,” said Roncevic. “It's strongly aligned with the mission of *No Shelf Required*—to educate, enlighten, and inspire everyone inside and outside the book industry about what ebooks and digital content can do for literacy. In short, they can transform the world into a place where access to knowledge flows freely in all directions. There is a way. And we are paving it together.”¹

From that Thursday, September 22, through December 6, 2016, when Croatia became a FREZ, every table at the Velvet Café included a pamphlet that displayed the following text:

Welcome to Velvet, a Free Reading Zone. We invite you to experience the future of reading—free, unlimited, and uninterrupted access to thousands of books.

- Scan the QR code or go to this site: totalboox.com/frez/cafevelvet/signup.
- Sign up with your email and password. You also need an Access Code (see your receipt).
- Install the Total Boox e-reader app in the Apple

or Android app store.

- When you open the app, do not “Sign Up” (since you've signed up before). Simply “Log in” with the same email and password (“Log in with your email”).
- After the app opens, press the “Get books” button to download books.
- You can also download books on the web site, www.totalboox.com.

Immediately upon downloading the app and registering, the guests received this welcome e-mail (displayed in both English and Croatian):

Dear guests,

Welcome to Velvet. We invite you to experience the future of reading—free, unlimited, and uninterrupted access to thousands of quality books from all over the world. From pop fiction and serious literature to spirituality and cooking. From poetry and travel to entertainment and sports. Your reading journey will never come to an end.

All you need is to install “Total Boox” app from any iOS or Android smartphone or tablet. When you open the app, click Log In, not Sign Up (since you are already registered) and enter your email and password. To download books, click “Get Books” inside the app. You can also create Shelves to organize your library.

Café Velvet is a well-known hangout, located on an iconic street in the heart of Zagreb's Old District that's become a major tourist draw in recent years. The moment you walk into the café, you notice that Velvet celebrates art and human creativity in every form imaginable. I certainly wasn't a stranger to it. I discovered it years ago when attending a poetry reading organized at the café. It's also a gallery displaying the artwork of Croatia's well-known artist and florist, Saša Šekoranja, which means that impeccable attention is given to every detail (the official image for Velvet FREZ, showing a woman on a bicycle, was designed by Šekoranja himself; see figure 3.1).

It took one hour with the café's owners for them to agree to turn Velvet into a FREZ. It took a week to sign a short agreement, and another week to set it all up. It can take months of back-and-forth with government employees to get one library to sign a deal with an e-book vendor. Likewise, it can take years to court and sign a publisher hesitant to work with alternative e-book models. As soon as we launched Velvet, I could sense that for the first time in my career I was engaging in a project outside the confines of the book and library industry. It wasn't without its challenges, but it seemed to flow better than I had been accustomed to.

Local celebrities and influential figures—including well-known actors, writers, journalists, and artists—joined forces with Velvet (without receiving financial compensation) to support the opening of the

first FREZ in their country and agreed to be photographed for the media and publicly support the project. The goal here was to get the public excited about e-book reading and to show what was possible with the book in 2016. Once the news got around that the project would create a lot of value for a lot of people, many local authors I got in contact with were willing to offer support as well, regardless of whether their own titles were available from their publishers. They also understood that Velvet was essentially the pilot that would set an example for other Free Reading Zones to follow not only in Croatia but throughout the region. In fact, most people in Croatia expected other zones to pop up around the country soon. What very few knew—and what we decided not to share publicly—was that the whole country would be open for reading just weeks from then.

Right around the time Velvet FREZ launched, we opened a page on Facebook called “Free Reading Zones: Croatia” (which was changed to “Croatia Reads” on the day the pilot launched to match the name of the app) and began educating people about e-books and their true potential. We also used those celebrity photographs to show that a range of regional celebrities were supporting the project. Within the first few weeks, we had garnered over 10,000 likes with a very modest marketing budget, and people from around the country (as well as the rest of Europe) shared their thoughts about e-books, digital reading, tablets, cost of reading, libraries, and so on.

Even though many supporters of the Facebook page did not live in Zagreb and were not located anywhere near Velvet to be able to use the reading app, they were very willing to share their thoughts and opinions on free access to e-books beyond libraries (since the Velvet story encouraged many such conversations) and were intrigued by what was taking place in the nation’s capital. Many also quickly recognized—and this was evident in their comments—that the reason for the Facebook page was not only to raise awareness about Velvet and the power of the technology to morph a small business into a powerful virtual library but also to show potential sponsors that the people out there were ready for this on a larger scale.

The Facebook page was our additional proof to potential sponsors that people wanted this. In my conversations with sponsors, I often referred them to the Facebook page to see firsthand how people were responding to what was happening at Velvet. In other

words, even without us being explicit about it, Facebook users sensed more was in store.

Velvet is a café that residents of Zagreb associate not only with first-rate coffee and cake but also with celebration of human creativity in every form. It is a literary establishment that has hosted countless book events over the years. But it is not the place where books are curated or managed. They simply are there, waiting for the reader to discover them on wooden shelves and on every table. And now books were also waiting to be read inside the guests’ mobile devices. Velvet did not ask its visitors to become members of the establishment. It didn’t preorder titles for them by guessing what they might like. It gave them the freedom to choose what mattered to them at the point of their need and want. And it placed its trust in the collection and the reading app to deliver quality literature for all tastes and ages.

Velvet, however, is not a library. It is a café. It will not stop serving coffee and cake. It will not stop paying attention to all the other non-book details its guests already admire. It will not remove print books from the tables or the shelves because of the existence of the virtual library. Its message to its guests was that it now simply wanted to support even more reading and add another layer to the “Velvet experience.” FREZ helped this café grow its brand. It helped it expand its horizons but remain true to its character. Velvet sponsored its guests’ reading but did not stand between them and their choice of books.

The ultimate message here was that a small private business like Velvet could be turned into an impressive virtual library through the use of technology—the kind of library that allows users to have access to knowledge in ways they couldn’t fathom in the past. This technology can turn any space into a zone where people read freely thanks to the sponsors willing to support it. And thanks to the simplicity of the metered-reading business model, we were now able to help re-envision the book industry and bring it more forcefully into the digital age.

Note

1. “Croatia Is Home to the First Café in the World Turned into a Free Reading Zone,” news release, *No Shelf Required*, September 22, 2016, www.noshelfrequired.com/croatia-is-home-to-the-first-cafe-in-the-world-turned-into-a-free-reading-zone.